

PRESS RELEASE



The Cleveland Museum of Art

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RARE EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS OF CHINA ON EXHIBIT AT CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

The Face of China As Seen by Photographers and Travelers 1860-1912, an exhibition of approximately 185 of the finest early photographs of China, will be on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art from July 11 through August 26, 1979.

The traveling exhibition was organized by Michael Hoffman, advisor to the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Alfred Stieglitz Center of Photography. Hoffman reviewed thousands of photographs in museum archives and private collections in Europe and America to select the images on display. Included are works by such renowned pioneer photographers as Felice Beato and John Thomson, as well as many lesser-known photographers, and some whose identities are unknown.

Chosen primarily for their artistic qualities and for what Hoffman felt was their ability to evoke the spirit of the past, the photographs also document an era. They show the land, people and culture of China from the close of the Opium Wars--and the forcible opening of the Chinese heartland to Western trade--to the fall of the Manchu dynasty.

China's dramatic scenery and exotic architecture--its temples, palaces, and pagodas--held an obvious fascination for early photographers and are well represented in the exhibition. People were more difficult to photograph since the slow emulsion speeds of that time did not permit accurate rendering of moving objects. Nonetheless, many classes of society are portrayed in this exhibition, from Manchu nobles and their families to peasants and itinerant tradesmen, from Buddhist monks to criminals awaiting execution.

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Hundreds of professional and amateur photographers came to China following the capture of Peking and the submission of the Chinese government to the Western powers in 1860, but little is known about most of them. The first known Western photographer in China was a Venetian, Felice Beato, who traveled with the Anglo-French armies to record the conquest of Tientsin and the sacking of the Imperial Summer Palace in 1860. Some of Beato's battlefield scenes as well as his views of Peking and Hong Kong are shown here.

John Thomson, a native of Scotland, who arrived in China in 1868, traveled widely in search of material for his four-volume Illustrations of China and Its People. Photographing both the high-born and the poor, he revealed the immense gulf separating ruler from ruled. Among other pioneer photographers represented in the exhibition are the botanist Ernest H. Wilson, who braved bandits in remote areas to photograph unknown species of plants and trees, and Donald Mennie and the White brothers, who focused their lenses on the dream-like scenes beloved by Chinese landscape artists.

The results achieved by these early photographers are astonishing considering the complexity of the photographic process at the time, the size and weight of early cameras and lenses, and the hazards of traveling in a strange, sometimes hostile, country. A history of the Western experience in China, including an account of the trials faced by its first photographers, is contained in The Face of China, an illustrated catalog for the exhibition published by Aperture, Inc. in association with the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It is available from the Museum sales desk for \$12.50.

Gallery talks on The Face of China are scheduled on Wednesday, August 1, and Sunday, August 5, at 1:30 p.m.

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